

SERMON DELIVERED AT HOLY GHOST ANGLICAN CHURCH ON 7 DECEMBER 2014

Welcome to the second Sunday of Advent. As I explained last week, Advent is a time of preparation. Yes...preparation for our celebration of Christmas in 18 more days. Are you tearing your hair out yet? And besides preparing for Christmas, we've got to be serious about preparing our lives for the second coming of Christ. Are you tearing your hair out about that too? Prepare, prepare, prepare.

I think it is safe to say that John the Baptist may be the patron saint of preparers. Preparation for the coming of the Saviour was his entire ministry, but according to some Bible scholars, his public ministry lasted only about three months. But for only 3 months work, he really left his mark on history! He even made Wikipedia!

And aren't we humans kinda preparers by nature? We spend years in school, then perhaps college and graduate school, preparing for our future. Preparing for our own and our children's' weddings, as we found out last year when our daughter got married.

But John's preparation fame was not about weddings, the dream home with a nice view of the Jordan River, vacations to his summer villa on the Mediterranean, or college educations. It was preparing a path in his life and the lives of his hearers for the coming Messiah. "Make straight the way" echoed his cry.

If we are really to get anything out of the Advent season, I think we have to see John as a model. How do we "make straight the way" for the return of our Lord? I'm sure each of us can make a list for own selves of how we can improve our Christian walk. I know I can. What about a checklist? Such as beginning each day by wholeheartedly offering our lives to God in Christ. Not a bad thing with which to begin your morning prayer.

The next thing we need to do is exactly what John the Baptist pleads with us to do. Repent.

Easy deal, right. To repent. Repent is only a six letter word. But what it implies is huge. Repentance requires that, first of all, we know what God expects of us. How do we determine that? Simple. Knowing your Bible by actually reading it. Every day in fact. If you need help, there are all kinds of Bible study resources on the Internet. You can download them to your smart phone and let them work their magic while you're sitting on the train or the bus. But not while you're riding your motor scooter.

Next is coming to church regularly and hearing the interpretation of God's word in the sermon. Hopefully the sermons you hear will give you something to think about.

Another great way is to be in a Bible study group. You see, when you study the Word of God in a group, God REALLY works wonders. It is amazing how the Bible speaks to different people in different ways. And how their experience with God can do big things in your life. I've seen it happen so many times.

Next, after gaining all that knowledge about what God expects of us, repentance requires that we correct whatever it is that we have determined bugs God. Psychologists and social workers talk about "behaviour modification." The forgiveness of God really depends upon Christian behaviour modification. Sometimes modification is not easy.

Once you've done steps one and two (gaining knowledge and then Christian behaviour modification), how do you know you are really forgiven? Easy. "Whose sins you shall forgive shall be forgiven." That's the promise of Jesus that he gave to the church. You can find it I John 20:23.

And where can you hear that proclamation of forgiveness? In confession.

Now confession brings to your mind that little box. But you can go down to Chiesa San Lorenzo a few blocks from here and see plenty of them. The priest sits in the middle and people kneel on either side and confess their sins through a wire screen.

Some churches in the Anglican Communion have the little confessional boxes, and priests are always ready to hear private confessions. But mostly those boxes are found in Roman Catholic churches, although the practice of "going to confession" has not been doing too well in the last 30 years.

So even though we Anglicans mostly confess directly to God, know that the proclamation of his forgiveness, called "absolution," is given at every Mass/Eucharist/Holy Communion to those who truly repent and modify their behaviour and who are willing to leave behind those persons or things that are destructive to a relationship with God. At every Mass we have the prayer of confession. After that, the priest proclaims God's forgiveness with the words of absolution.

All of what I said about knowing God's expectations for us, about repentance and about forgiveness is part one of the process of Advent. The second is to take our skills and resources as Christians and to reach out and help make straight the path of others. We do this by our deeds of prayer and action.

The Anglican Scholar, John Stott, who died recently, wrote "The Christian life is a family affair in which the children enjoy fellowship with each other, but let it not for one moment be thought that it exhausts the Christian's responsibilities. We must also evangelize, which means literally to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. Although every Christian is not called to be a minister or a missionary, God does intend every Christian to be a witness to Jesus Christ. In the home, among friends, in college or at the place of business, it is a solemn responsibility to live a consistent, loving, humble, honest, Christ-like life, and to seek to win other people for Christ."

C.S. Lewis points us toward that straight path with these words, "If we let God, for we can prevent Him if we choose - [but if we let Him], He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful; but that is what we are in for. Nothing less."

As Advent continues, I invite you to go deeper. Let us join John the Baptist in preparing for our Lord's coming. Let us turn from those things, those paths that are not of God, open our hearts and our souls and say with all that we are, "I'm with you, God," and let's give our lives to gently loving others so that they may do the same.